

Wellesley Club Talk

November 14, 2016

In January 1897 the Wellesley Park Commission, Isaac Sprague, Joseph Peabody, and Franklin Gilson, contracted with the firm of Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot, at a cost of \$100, to assess possibilities for the community's parks. The Commissioner had an idea for a linear parkway and park, similar to the Riverway in Boston and Brookline. John Charles Olmsted, the senior partner in the firm at that time, visited Wellesley in January and prepared a written report. Olmsted's report of February 9, 1897 offered general recommendations for Wellesley's parks, as well as specific advice regarding Fuller Brook. The report described the Town:

... the town is a pleasing landscape composed of gently rolling fields, groves and woods, breezy hills, pretty brooks, beautiful ponds with woody borders and one of the most charming rivers in this part of the country.

This last of course referring to the Charles River. The report goes on to address Fuller Brook with an expression of concern about the potential health hazard caused by low-lying swampy areas and the need for town to assume responsibility for sanitary improvements. The report notes that without drainage improvements:

The swamps will become polluted by the overflow and seepage from cesspools and vaults... both choking natural drainage channels and breeding virulent diseases as well as unhealthy conditions... The only remedy lies in the carrying out of a well-considered general scheme of improvement by the public authorities, partly directly and partly through the regulation of the private use of land.

Whoever comes to study such a scheme of land drainage will find the problem enormously simplified if the town lays out a road on each side of the principal brooks and swamps and takes the land between for public pleasure grounds. Thus will proper routes be provided for future sewers... wet lands will be saved from contamination and be preserved in their natural beauty or drained and smoothed for playgrounds.

In March of 1899, the commissioners presented their plan to the town to acquire land along Fuller Brook for parkway and drainage purposes and for the future development of a sewer system. The estimated cost of the project was \$40,000 for acquisition and development and \$3,000/year for maintenance.

Land acquisition began in 1899 and deeds clearly indicated that the land was being acquired for the dual purpose of drainage and parkland. Landscape Architect Warren Manning was hired to assist the town in determining boundaries for the park and in drawing plans for brook deepening and straightening and for re-grading the banks.

By 1903 land acquisition between Abbott Road and Cottage Street was almost complete including about 70 acres of parkland and 1 ½ miles of watercourse. The extension of parkland west to Dover Road was not completed until 1925.

By 1907 the Park Commissioners reported that the bed of Fuller Brook had been straightened and lowered approximately 2 ½ to 3' From Cottage St. to Hunnewell Playground and from Forest Street to Abbott Road. "transforming the bog land into useful hay land, with a long range plan of making it fit for recreational use."

In 1910, Ernest Bowditch was hired to develop the town's sewer system. The sewer system was constructed 1915-1921 and caused major disruption of the landscape of the park. The landscape was restored but the presence of the sewer meant a cyclical pattern of construction and restoration that has been an integral part of the park's history.

In 1918 the Park Commission hired A. Stewart Cassidy to prepare plans for bridges for roads crossing Fuller Brook. The first bridge constructed was that at Cameron Street, in 1930, of which the Park Commission stated, "we expect this bridge to be the standard for all future bridges across Fuller Brook." In 1931 a new stone face was built on the stone arch bridge at Wellesley Ave. The State Street bridge was built in 1949 with a matching appearance.

From the earliest acquisition the Town worked continuously on its development and improvements, including drainage, pathways, and landscaping. Major projects included major drainage work, assisted by the Mass DPW Division of Waterways to straighten, deepen, and widen the brook from 1957-1960. Channelization of the brook from Grove St. to Dover Road, involving the concrete channel liners that we just removed, caused a significant public outcry.

From that time to the late 1980's the town maintained the stream banks by mowing. During this period park management evolved into an emphasis on playgrounds and recreation. Combined with shrinking maintenance funding, landscape parks throughout the country received less active management. At Fuller Brook the Natural Resource Commission made the decision to allow the park to evolve to a more natural appearance and to emphasize habitat values over a highly managed appearance.

In 2003, the NRC began the process that has led to the current construction project by commissioning a new park master plan. A long process of planning, design, and permitting, including significant public involvement has resulted in the current construction project.